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**MAKING MARY'S YES OUR OWN:  
A STUDY OF THEOLOGICAL PERSONHOOD**

*Ronald Novotny, PhD, STL\**

**Introduction**

A theme for this meeting, drawn from John Paul II's *Redemptoris Mater* (37), is that "Mary, at the side of her son is the most perfect image of freedom and liberation of humanity. By saying yes to God's call and carrying out a mission, a consent made in perfect freedom, she became what Balthasar calls a theological person. Here we will also reflect upon the writings of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber who initiated the concept of the I-Thou relationship as a vehicle of personhood. The Annunciation scene will serve as the setting of this archetypal dialogic encounter of Mary's yes, spoken in freedom, for all those who will follow, who likewise wish to say yes to God's providential call, plan, and mission in salvation history. This study will especially rely on Balthasar's theo-dramatic elements of relation, uniqueness, and mission, which comprise his dialogic principle.

**Covenant**

The covenantal relationship which God initiated with his people perdured throughout salvation history from the Old Testament into the New Testament. God's covenant with Israel was unique. Not only are the partners brought together, but they also belong to one another and are mutually bound; they have a guarantee to be faithful to one another, and they go even farther. God asks his people to make a choice. God

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prefers that humans make a choice (Ex. 20:20).<sup>1</sup> The people say yes, making the covenant with Israel bilateral in character. There is a movement away from the more ancient treaty-and-oath covenants designed for nations to a more personal covenantal relationship. What was promise in the old becomes full reality in the new. As Abraham, Moses, and David were great figures of the Old Covenant, Mary, the Virgin mother of Jesus, will be the archetypal figure of the New Covenant. She will be bound to God and Him to her. At the core of her being, in her heart, she will be bound to God by covenant. All covenantal agreements are types of dialogue. Her highly personalized dialogue with God, through Gabriel,<sup>2</sup> will also be the archetype of the God-human relation, not only because it includes all of the dialogic elements but also because of her uniqueness. The Annunciation scene will serve as the exemplary event in the New Testament of the God-human relation. Let us examine the Annunciation as an example of dialogic covenantal relationship.

The Annunciation certainly reveals a real dialogue taking place between an angel and Mary. It is rooted in reality. It is an encounter between two of God's creatures, communicating in a language common and understandable to both. The narrative unfolds in the context of a dialogue. In her dialogue with God through the archangel Gabriel, Mary is the model for all God-human dialogue. Her "yes," free exercise of her will, assenting to God's call in her life, and her intelligent acceptance in faith of God's plan, is the archetype of every dialogue that will follow. The Annunciation scene is an exemplary event of the

<sup>1</sup> W. Bouwmeester, *The Bible on the Covenant* (De Pere, WI: St. Norbert Abbey Press, 1966), 26.

<sup>2</sup> It is common for God to use an intermediary when carrying on a conversation with his creatures, e.g., three angels speaking to Abraham and an angel in the burning bush speaking to Moses. In the most ancient texts the angel of Yahweh (Gen. 22:11; Ex. 3:2; Jg. 2:1, etc.), or the angel of God (Gen. 21:17; 31:11; Ex. 14:19, etc.), is not a created being distinct from God (Ex. 23:20), but God himself in a form visible to men. Gen. 16:13 identifies the angel with Yahweh: "Hagar gave a name to Yahweh who had spoken to her: 'You are El Roi,' for, she said 'Surely this is a place where I, in my turn, have seen the one who sees me?'"



God-human relation because of its uniqueness and because it demonstrates in an essential manner that an individual becomes a unique person through dialogue with God and through the humble acceptance of the role and mission that God has chosen for each creature.

The Annunciation dialogue, the announcement of the incarnation of Jesus, is exemplary; it reveals the hidden workings of God's relation with humans. The dialogue is the vehicle for becoming the person who God wishes us to become. The dialogic event of the Annunciation scene is effective in portraying (in a perfect role model) all that is essential to produce the theological person. Without the Annunciation dialogue, theology loses the exemplary meaning of God's free choice; unmerited grace; the divine plan in relation to the creature's uniqueness; "yes" given in freedom; the response to call, role, and function. These exemplary elements are to be found in every true dialogue which brings forth personhood and hastens God's kingdom upon this earth.

Mary is at the center of the history of salvation because God forms the covenant with her: "Not necessarily so because she accomplished it, but more simply because of her acceptance."<sup>3</sup> What better statement to begin the investigation of Mary as model of personhood than to speak of her acceptance of God's covenant and her role or mission in it. Covenant means saying yes to the invitation of God in order to be with God.<sup>4</sup>

### **Dialogical Principle**

The concept of dialogue can clearly be seen in biblical covenants. These covenant stories reveal the God-human relationship and point to certain aspects of personhood (relation, uniqueness, mission). Their development of the dialogical principle supplied a framework for understanding theological personhood. Martin Buber is well known for proposing and

<sup>3</sup> Ignace de la Potterie, S.J., *Mary in the Mystery of the Covenant*, trans. Bertrand Buby (New York: Alba House, 1992), xl.

<sup>4</sup> La Potterie, *Mary in the Mystery*, xl.

developing the I-Thou relationship as the bestower of personhood.<sup>5</sup> He asserted the unnegatable individuality in relations between any I and Thou and the uniqueness of the relationship between them. In tracing the history of the dialogical principle it is necessary to present Buber's and Balthasar's thoughts and the thinking of those who influenced them. Buber was not only a translator of the Bible but a man of the Bible. His religious views clustered around what seemed to him to be the center of biblical religion: the confrontation of man [the human person] and God, in the situation of the I and Thou encounter. He looked to Scripture to portray this I-Thou encounter. In Genesis, the Lord addresses Abraham, "Abraham, where art thou?"; and Abraham replies, "Here I am." This action of God, this conversation in which God addresses the human person, has no parallel in the scriptures of any other religion.

Buber, Kierkegaard, and other philosophers of the dialogue all begin their intellectual quest with observations on and connections with the Bible, especially covenant stories. Without formally addressing the dialogic elements of the covenant, they nevertheless see in these stories the primordial God-human relation. Rosenzweig, Ebner and Buber<sup>6</sup> all attest to the individual becoming distinct from every other human being by the name by which God addresses him/her, ". . . only thus is he no longer simply an individual of a species, but a unique person."<sup>7</sup>

When God calls a man's name, the man answers. Unlike the Sinai covenant, where God called a people, revelation is now seen as God calling a single person. God loves the individual and through this love the individual is liberated from his/her solitude. God's love is spontaneous and, as a recipient of this love, the human person loves in return. The analogy in the Song of Songs, comparing God's love to human love, is not just an illustration but is an expression of the essence of love itself.

<sup>5</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Martin Buber and Christianity: A Dialogue between Israel and the Church*, trans. Alexander Dru (New York: Macmillan, c1961), 9. Balthasar calls Buber the originator of the "dialogical principle."

<sup>6</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, trans. Graham Harrison (5 vols.; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988-1998), 1:628.

<sup>7</sup> Balthasar, *Theo-drama*, 1:628.

Turning from philosophers, we acknowledge God's relationship with us. This dialogue of love that sees each partner as unique continues with a new mode of cognition as the lover then responds, "I have called you by name. You are mine." The lover now sees that cognition itself takes place in the context of the interaction of an "I" and a "you." The cognitive discourse of creation is fixed in time and place by the revelatory dialogue of an "I" and a "you." The "I," called to speak by its proper name, enables revelation to go beyond the impersonal discourse of creation. "With the call of the proper name the word of revelation steps into real dialogue. . . ."<sup>8</sup>

The philosophy of dialogue reached its consummate form in Martin Buber's *I and Thou* published in 1923. It was Buber's attempt to answer the existential question, "Who am I?". Balthasar would take up the same question and would utilize the dialogic event in his own system of thought. Both men share, in part, these existentialist views of dialogue. Here I quote, in part, from Balthasar's well-known description of call and mission: "While standing in the Black Forest, I was struck as by lightning . . . And yet it was neither theology nor the priesthood which then came into my mind in a flash. It was simply this: you have nothing to choose; you have been called. You will not serve; you will be taken into service. You have no plans to make; you are just a little stone in a mosaic, which has long been ready. All I needed to do was to stand there and wait and see what I would be needed for."<sup>9</sup>

Herein begins Balthasar's placing himself completely at the disposal of God. These are the thoughts that will one day occupy a central place in Balthasar's theological system—the election, mission, and sending. These elements shine with a brilliant luster in the Annunciation. They may be considered a guiding concept by which a human being receives uniqueness before God and among other persons. Like Buber, who felt that he had received a mission from God, so Balthasar felt commissioned by

<sup>8</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. (from 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1930) William Hallo (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1985, c1971), 74.

<sup>9</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *My Work: In Retrospect* (San Francisco: Communio Books, 1993), 11.

God to give witness as a theologian of God's love that was espoused and given through the vehicle of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. For Buber and Balthasar, the immediate encounter with God—who calls first, who initiates, who addresses the person as Thou—was the touchstone for each of their “theologies.” When human life is lived in its fullest expression, the “I” is always related to a “Thou.”

What was a fleeting thought in the Black Forest held the seeds for the further theological development not only of mission but also of the “yes” and the shared destiny that servant and master experience. We are all stamped, as it were, with Mary's yes as a page bears a watermark. This “Marian personality structure” (a term used by Johann Roten) is of critical importance, since this presentation addresses the topic of person with Mary serving as both the anthropological model and the fulfillment of personhood. In one grand sentence yielding a panorama of Balthasarian theology, Roten outlines some of the main features of this present Marian study. Pointing to Mary as bringing unity to love and obedience, Roten continues, speaking of a Marian influence on Balthasar's epistemology; he states:

Balthasar's epistemological Yes is a deeply realistic one: it is a Yes to reality in concreteness and totality, the affirmative and joyous acceptance of God's incarnational challenge to humanity, the creature's ready self-recognition as a creature, and the truly Catholic affirmation of all dimensions in the relationship between God and the human being.<sup>10</sup>

God takes up the drama of the world and existence and again raises it to another level in which, as sovereign God, he decides to play on our stage. Our play now “plays” in his play. Yet we can still say that God walks upon the world stage. Such entrance into the play reveals that God's action and the world drama have an ontological ground. And ultimately he [God] appears as a human being. There is no escaping playing a part in God's play, whether we do so willingly and knowingly or not. The fortunate person does realize that he is playing a role

<sup>10</sup> J. G. Roten, “Marian Anthropological Dimensions,” in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work*, ed. David L. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 84.



in the play and is the better for it. Theater, of course, relies on the premise that, in the very act of playing a role, the player would discern the meaning of the role and would thereby transcend self. One must keep in mind that God is always the director of the play and remains so even when he plays a role in salvation history. Theater's contribution to fundamental theology is that it continues to put forth questions about the meaning of life, life's roles and God's role. Again Balthasar sees drama mirrored in life when he states ". . . that the divine dramatic answer has already taken place in the form of the human dramatic question."<sup>11</sup>

In the first volume of *Theo-drama*, Balthasar cites the principle of dialogue as providing "one of the most fruitful new approaches to Christian life and thought."<sup>12</sup> He finds in the biblical event of Covenant all the important issues of the dialogic principle—relation between God and human beings, the freedom that God gives to each individual created as an independent being, a realm or space where he/she can freely hear, answer and "ultimately cooperate responsibly with God."<sup>13</sup> In Balthasar's work, there is a definite stress on saying "yes" from one's innermost freedom. Many seekers of God and truth would assent to these elements that comprise the dialogic principle. Balthasar, because he is a Christian and Catholic, goes further. For him the "genuine dialogue" occurs with the appearance of God's Son: the dialogue is between Father and Son, God in heaven and God as a human being on earth. Now freedom, love and obedience can be understood in an entirely different light. With the Son's appearance, the dialogue, ever present in God, is revealed.

### Word and Dialogue

Balthasar always places these essential elements of the genuine dialogic process (role, mission, relation, freedom) within the context of theo-drama, the "acting area."<sup>14</sup> All of the brothers and sisters of Christ stand about Him as He plays the central

<sup>11</sup> Roten, "Marian Anthropological Dimensions," 21.

<sup>12</sup> Roten, "Marian Anthropological Dimensions," 34.

<sup>13</sup> Roten, "Marian Anthropological Dimensions," 34.

<sup>14</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-drama*, 3:249.

role on stage. Christ's normative role with its archetypal quality determines his role in the theo-drama. As the Son, he makes present the triune God and provides the access to God that only he can provide. This is a divine role. As the acting Person, he is the anthropological model. All human conscious subjects are allotted personalizing roles or missions in Christ.<sup>15</sup>

It is Christ, the Word, the communication with us from the Father, from whom mankind learns of the love of the I-Thou relationship.<sup>16</sup> As Christ received his mission from his relationship with his Father, so each human being becomes a person through Christ in the dialogic process. "God wants us, in Christ, to be persons who express God's unique idea of us."<sup>17</sup> Balthasar quotes Simmel on uniqueness: "the special quality of existence that no one else can do, of standing on a spot that has been waiting for us, so to speak" and "that everyone make profit with 'his' particular pound."<sup>18</sup>

### **Mary as the Icon of Freedom**

The *Gnothi Seauton* ("Know thyself"), the call to self-knowledge, involves the aspects of role, masks, and the basic question of who one is. Our will decides what role we are to play in life. Thus enters the topic of freedom—for ancient Stoics, modern philosophers, and theologians alike. The person uses his/her freedom to reason and make something out of the material given to him/her. Such freedom is a participation in the divine as one reflects upon oneself and one's ability to create. "Everyone must possess 'the meaning of his own personality [*idion prosopon*]' and thus decide what value he sets on himself. . . ." <sup>19</sup> This freedom invites the person to say yes to the unique way in which God is fashioning the person's life.

<sup>15</sup> Balthasar, *Theo-drama*, 3:249.

<sup>16</sup> Raymond Gawronski, S.J., *Word and Silence: Christian Obedience and Mystical Experience: A Study in the Particular Nature of the Christian Experience of God (Gotteserfahrung) in the Works of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Rome: Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana, Facultas Theologiae, 1992), 83.

<sup>17</sup> Gawronski, *Word and Silence*, 83.

<sup>18</sup> Roten, "Marian Anthropological Dimensions," 606.

<sup>19</sup> Roten, "Marian Anthropological Dimensions," 495.

Obedying God and doing his will (mission) is the "only true use of human freedom."<sup>20</sup> Even in ancient times, there was a sense of God allotting roles to individuals; this allowed, for example, Socrates to say, "I would rather die a thousand times than desert it." From freedom, to mission, to call—here are easily seen steps. The person who knows that he/she has been entrusted with a task learns to assent to everything as it takes place. H/she waits upon God. Balthasar, steeped in Ignatian prayer, speaks of Ignatian indifference and how it teaches us to be impartial to everything except God's instructions. So the *Suscipe* prayer of Ignatius begins by surrendering first one's liberty. Although Socrates' sentiments precede those of Ignatius by more than 1500 years, they are similar to the Ignatian understanding of God's offered roles, of freedom of choice and submission to Him.

The personal, unique, Christian God created the unique creature in His image—the human person. Uniqueness creates uniqueness, asking in return that the person—created freedom—choose what has been given him/her to do. Absolute freedom asks for the return of freedom in a responsible fashion. The creature's task is to willingly integrate oneself into the divine plan.

The God who addresses the Thou in dialogue is the same God who gives the very gift of existence to every human creature, as He likewise tells each creature who the creature is for Him. It is God who gives the entity its reality. "This particular 'I' with its distinctive qualities receives its entire self from the hands of infinite freedom, and the hallmark by which it can recognize that it is a gift is the ontological difference that operates in it."<sup>21</sup> It has been admitted to reality, given existence for a reason known to God. The creature comes to learn of the gift—character of existence, the reason for its being made—the call. Lastly, it learns to become grateful for its existence and the reason for which it was created by God.

<sup>20</sup> Roten, "Marian Anthropological Dimensions," 495.

<sup>21</sup> Roten, "Marian Anthropological Dimensions," 290.



In a world that speaks in so many voices the message of “owning oneself,” of fulfilling and pleasing oneself, Balthasar’s message of “owing oneself” to the Eternal Word seems very foreign to contemporary ears. As finite freedom realizes that it is a gift of Infinite Freedom, it must set out freely on the road leading to that self-realization which God has in mind for the creature. For Balthasar there is a close connection between freedom and being a person, between being a person and mission, between mission and freedom. A person can only be perfected “when it has become ‘Thou’ in God’s sight in its fully divine, absolute manner, when it has become identical with the ‘idea’ reserved for the finite ‘thou’ within the infinite ‘Thou,’ within the eternal Word and Son.”<sup>22</sup> By this he means, as St. Paul stated, that God’s chosen are “predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom. 8:29).

Man realizes that he is a “task to be performed”<sup>23</sup> and that his freedom is directed to embracing necessity. What occurs in the creature’s life is a pale reflection of how Jesus received his mission and shared in God’s own life. It is only by sharing in this eternal dynamism that the person in the world can carry out the mission, the realization, the fulfillment of theological personhood.

The Holy Spirit provides each person with a mission and personality to be realized according to a “prepared” plan, but also provides that same person an inner freedom to follow or not follow that plan. God took the first step in freedom and love, and equipped man to act in Christ’s acting area and therefore respond to God’s prior action. Like Christ, all other persons must in obedience embrace what is expected of them by God, for in doing so they discover who they are. Jesus had an unmistakable awareness of his mission. Mary’s awareness was steeped in a clouded night of faith. The journey along the road to perfection allows the creature to become more aware of God’s will for him or her. As God allows room for the dialogic principle to occur, so he leaves room in theo-dramatic exis-

<sup>22</sup> Roten, “Marian Anthropological Dimensions,” 291.

<sup>23</sup> Roten, “Marian Anthropological Dimensions,” 339.

tence for creatures to have analogous, unique, personal missions. God knows me through my mission and person in the "new name" by which he addresses me.<sup>24</sup> A transformation occurs as a result of the dialogic principle resulting in participation in "Theo-drama." "Mission makes him a person,<sup>25</sup> a person-in-dialogue.<sup>26</sup> And for him/her, only God can define who the subject is and why he/she is there, and it is God who sets forth the meaning, the task, the vocation.<sup>27</sup>

### God-human Relationship in the Annunciation

Now we turn again to the Annunciation. So far we have situated the dialogue and developed the theme of the relationship between dialogue and the God-human relationship. Covenant is an expression of that dialogic encounter, and several dialogical covenants were mentioned. The Annunciation scene of Luke provides the perfect example of the dialogal, covenantal, God-human relationship because it quintessentially demonstrates all the elements of the dialogic principle, their operation, and results. The Annunciation contains the dialogical elements—relationship with God, I-Thou relation, uniqueness, mission, and freedom. In the Annunciation, Mary attained theological personhood through the dialogical principle.

The New Covenant was made between God and the woman Mary.<sup>28</sup> La Potterie, in his book *Mary in the Mystery of the Covenant*, reflects on the "profound structure of the mystery of Mary," calling it the "very structure of the Covenant" seen from the side of humanity, whom Mary represents.<sup>29</sup> Covenant is the concretization of the dialogue. It is a form of dialogic encounter. Since Mary entered most deeply into a covenant with God through the dialogic encounter at the Annunciation, we see how Mary's identity as partner with God, both in covenant

<sup>24</sup> Roten, "Marian Anthropological Dimensions," 208.

<sup>25</sup> Roten, "Marian Anthropological Dimensions," 208.

<sup>26</sup> Roten, "Marian Anthropological Dimensions," 211.

<sup>27</sup> Roten, "Marian Anthropological Dimensions," 220.

<sup>28</sup> La Potterie, *Mary in the Mystery*, xi.

<sup>29</sup> La Potterie, *Mary in the Mystery*, xii

relationship and dialogue, are closely related. The faith and obedience essential to God's covenant are also conditions of the dialogue.<sup>30</sup>

Ephesians 1:6 states that God is shown to have completely exhausted His favor and grace upon all of mankind through His beloved Son's redemption. So we see an approximation of this "complete exhaustiveness" in his pouring out his grace upon Mary.<sup>31</sup> Mary is the embodiment of the full grammatical-etymological significance of *kecharitoméne*. Her name "denotes one who has been and still is the object of divine benevolence, one who has been favored and continues to be favored by God, one who has been granted supernatural grace and remains in that state."<sup>32</sup> This statement reflects the meaning of a perfect passive participle; what has been received in the past continues into the present. The form of this causative verb then would signify that the action of the grace of God has already brought about a change. Mary has been *transformed by the grace of God*.<sup>33</sup> God's grace has rendered her holy, perfectly holy.<sup>34</sup>

This transformation by grace occurred long before the conversation with Gabriel recorded by Luke. *Kecharitoméne*, as a perfect participle, indicates this as past event. Bertrand Buby states, "Chronologically, literally, and theologically, this text can be seen as referring then to the holiness of Mary prior to the birth of Jesus."<sup>35</sup> It is a major contention of this study that during the dialogue she received her mission and formally began it by saying yes to the divine maternity.

Mary's new name, *Kecharitoméne*, heightens her uniqueness as person and the uniqueness of her role. The uniqueness

<sup>30</sup> Geneviève Honoré-Lainé, *La femme et le mystère de l'alliance* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1985), 19.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. La Potterie, *Mary in the Mystery*, 17–20.

<sup>32</sup> A quote from Michael J. Gruenthaner, S.J., "Mary in the New Testament," in *Mariology*, ed. Juniper B. Carol, O.F.M. (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1954), 85, cited by Eugene R. Cole, "What Did St. Luke Mean by *Kecharitoméne*?" *American Ecclesiastical Review* 139 (1958): 231.

<sup>33</sup> La Potterie, *Mary in the Mystery*, 18.

<sup>34</sup> La Potterie, *Mary in the Mystery*, 17.

<sup>35</sup> Buby, *Mary of Galilee*, 1:72.

of each person as created by God and the uniqueness that comes from a specific call is reflected in her new name. The three initial statements made by Gabriel set the stage for the further encounter by which Mary becomes a theological person through obedience to God's plan and designs. "She was deeply disturbed by these words and asked herself what this greeting could mean, but the angel said to her, 'Mary do not be afraid; you have won God's favor'" (Lk. 1:29-30). Mary is troubled by the words of Gabriel since they carry so much meaning (to the ears of an Old Testament figure) and so much mystery (to the ears of a New Testament figure). Either Gabriel senses or Mary exhibits consternation: she, a humble girl, is being addressed in a language that connotes election, mission and God's promise to help her. He speaks a second time telling her not to fear. Mary knows that there is more here than the usual appearance of an angel with a heavenly greeting. And even the intended solicitation, "Do not be afraid," might stir up past images relating to Israel's destiny and her possible role now in Israel's future. "Be not afraid" is a formula found in the Old Testament at the beginning of a theophany (cf. Tob. 12:17). It is also found in the New Testament when Jesus appeared to his disciples after his resurrection (cf. Mt. 28:5; Mk. 16:6; Lk. 24:38). Here, it is spoken as a reassuring word to a justifiably frightened creature of God. Out of deference to Mary and in order for his words to "sink into" Mary's heart, Gabriel pauses after his words (verse 28). Mary's non-verbal response is reflected in Luke's words "she was deeply disturbed by these words and asked herself what this greeting could mean." Gabriel pauses only to speak again, "Mary, do not be afraid." This is not just an attempt to dispel fear from the soul of Mary, but it is another call to joy.<sup>36</sup>

Because the triple salutation contained so much news and information, challenge and mystery, Mary is deeply disturbed and rightfully so. No one has ever been so addressed in the history of mankind. Origen wrote: "Since the angel greeted Mary in new terms—terms that I have been unable to find in all of

<sup>36</sup> S. Lyonnet, S.J., "*Chaire, Kecharitoméne*," *Biblica* 20/2 (1939): 141.



Scripture, it is necessary to say something about it: *Chaire Kecharitoméne*...it is a greeting exclusively reserved to Mary.”<sup>37</sup> St. Ambrose’s remarks are similar: “She is startled by this new formula of benediction which has never been read, never been used before. For Mary alone was this greeting reserved.”<sup>38</sup>

This verse bears the dialogal element of uniqueness, as these words mark her as a person of covenantal importance. She stands with the small band of great figures of the Old Testament with whom God formed a covenant. She is the most unique being, the highly-favored recipient of God’s favor. This verse hints at the intimacy that becomes more obvious as the dialogue continues. The idea of intimacy in the personal relationship of the dialogue is important in itself and in the context of the spousal aspects of covenant. Mary, our model in faith, is the object and recipient of God’s grace and favor. Each person who enters into the encounter or *I-Thou* relationship with God is likewise the object of God’s favor, which at times can be sensed during the encounter, but can never be adequately described. This intimacy is further shown by Gabriel calling her by her name, Mary. This certainly refers to another dialogal element—relationship with God. It is a relationship that was not built on a single event, and it does not refer to a particular gift of grace or favor but an all-encompassing attention and love. Through the dialogue, one is able to investigate God’s disposition toward Mary, and by doing so, one can extrapolate how God relates to all of his creatures. Klemens Stock makes an insightful observation regarding this God-human relationship when he states that God’s favor refers first of all to the person Mary and then to the task he has chosen for her.<sup>39</sup> Mary learns that this God of freedom is relational, drawing her into commitments to Himself and to others.

<sup>37</sup> Origen, Homil. 6, *In Lucam*, PG, xiii, 1815, as cited by Eugene R. Cole, “What Did St. Luke Mean by *Kecharitoméne*?” 229.

<sup>38</sup> St. Ambrose, “Expositio Evangelii secundum Lucam,” PL, XV, 1554, 555, as cited by Eugene R. Cole, “What Did St. Luke Mean by *Kecharitoméne*?” 229.

<sup>39</sup> Klemens Stock, “La vocazione di Maria (Lc 1,26-38),” *Marianum* 54/1-2 (1983): 114.

It is not primarily the appointing, the strength, or the ability to carry out the task that is important, only the relationship of person-to-person, the relationship of God with the person Mary. God provides strength and ability; Mary provides her availability, her willingness to hand herself over to him. Although God has in mind her contribution and equips her for this task by her transformation in grace, he relates to her first as a person.<sup>40</sup> In these verses he is aware of her dismay and confusion.

If he had so wished, God could have communicated to Mary in a command fashion, as he did to Jonah, "Get up and proclaim," and to Abraham, "Go."<sup>41</sup> Such a military style does not allow for an invitation to cooperate. It speaks of a master-servant relationship without the exercise of complete freedom. It is in the dialogal type of vocation that one can see choice and freedom operating between God and the human being. God takes the initiative but he sends a messenger to deliver a message that he desires to impart. Mary is free to ask questions, to respond and to expose her thinking and her point of view. These Lucan Annunciation verses indicate the imperative nature of the call and the demand for an immediate response.<sup>42</sup> Mary must have experienced in the encounter this sense of urgency and a demand for a response. As in most dialogical encounters, there is the element of ineffability.

La Potterie offers two possible versions of these passages from Luke. In the Greek text one finds "andra ou ginosko," and in the Vulgate "quoniam virum non cognosco." Both expressions are translated literally as "I do not know man at all," or "since I have not had relations with a man."<sup>43</sup> This rather simple verse has presented many problems among Scripture scholars. It is important for this study to investigate the reasons

<sup>40</sup> Stock, "La vocazione di Maria," 114.

<sup>41</sup> Walter Vogels, "Les récits de vocation des prophètes," *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 95 (1973): 5.

<sup>42</sup> Fearghus O'Fearghail, "The Literary Forms of Lk 1,5-25 and 1,26-38," *Marianum* 43 (1981): 334.

<sup>43</sup> La Potterie, *Mary in the Mystery*, 22.

underlying Mary's question of verse 34, since it involves her understanding and acceptance of the proffered mission. Furthermore the issue of virginity alluded to here directly relates to Mary's obedience and the freedom that she will exercise in the dialogue. The exegetical arguments must be pursued in part whenever they impact on the elements of the dialogical principle (her yes to mission and freedom, but also her relation to God and the singular uniqueness of a virgin giving birth). The issue of virginity is a complicated and multi-faceted topic that relates to Mary's assent to God's plan.

Klemens Stock feels that, even as she asks "how," she is absolutely open to God's word. She asks only to understand what she cannot fully comprehend in her mind or imagination.<sup>44</sup> She knows it is impossible to become a mother while remaining a virgin. This is the message of joy contained in germ form in her new name, *kecharitoméne*.<sup>45</sup> She is to be joyful because that for which she had had a desire her entire life—to be a virgin or to lead a virginal life—was going to be left intact, while she was going to bear the Messiah. It is cause for a "double joy" or even greater joy that, as the "highly favored one," she would be the virgin-mother of the Messiah.

The dialogical principle influences Mary's "disposition" to lead a virginal life through a complete giving of self over to God. If Mary had been leading this virginal existence, even though not consciously being able to even articulate it, she would experience confusion and dismay at the announcement that she would bear a son. If she had actually made something similar to a vow to God, her dismay and bewilderment would have been even greater. Only through this dialogue with God does she discover that she will give birth to the "Son of the Most High." Here occurs the juxtaposition of the highly favored and grace-filled life, a virginal life, and the reality of impending motherhood announced by an angel sent by God. Through the dialogic encounter she must struggle with this news and decide what her answer will be. Her relationship to God has been

<sup>44</sup> Stock, "La vocazione di Maria," 118.

<sup>45</sup> Ernesto Della Corte, "Kecharitoméne (Lc 1,28). *Crux Interpretum*," *Marianum* 52/1-2 (1990): 140.



in a singular direction, but she now learns through the dialogic encounter that life will be changed and a new direction given. The "virginal disposition," of course, disposes her to choose not her will, even if she believes it is prompted by God, but God's will. Certainly there would be great consolation in being told, again in dialogue, in relation to God in words that she must trust, that she is confirmed in her virginal stance and that this will be a virginal conception. This must occur only through a dialogue. A prophetic interior message or dream would be open to misinterpretation or lack of credibility by a creature as humble as Mary. This is an auditory message that must be heard, heeded, contended with and assented to.

This narrative keeps moving in the direction of the offering of the mission, thereby conferring personhood. It is this birth oracle that constitutes the mission or commissioning found in call narratives.<sup>46</sup> The uniqueness of this call elicits from God a revelation of his power and its infinite possibility.<sup>47</sup> These words tell Mary that God has the power to do what has been related thus far. It is important that Mary hears of God's power and action to aid her impending decision-making. God has the ability to act as described in verse 35 and the ability to assist Mary in realizing her task. Only through God's presence with her ("The Lord is with you") can this virginal conception come about. This *I-Thou* relation with God reveals the mission, and God waits upon Mary for her answer. "I am the handmaid of the Lord," said Mary, 'let what you have said be done to me.' And the angel left her" (Luke 1:38). The dialogue closes with Mary's joyful assent, in obedient bidding, to Gabriel's opening word of command, "Rejoice."

Luke again uses a unique word, *genoito*, an optative form of the verb which is used positively only in this unique place in the New Testament.<sup>48</sup> The optative form of the verb expresses a joyous desire, in distinction to an agreement given with resignation. By her *fiat* (the Latin translation of *genoito*),

<sup>46</sup> Cf. George Soares-Prabhu, S.J., "Rejoice Favoured One! Mary in the Annunciation Story of Luke," *Biblebasbavam* 3 (1977): 262.

<sup>47</sup> Stock, "La vocazione di Maria," 119.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. La Potterie, *Mary in the Mystery*, 35.

Mary joyously says "yes" to whatever God has in store for her in the future. It is a total abandonment. The word expresses the joy that she experiences in handing herself over to God in freedom, a major element of the dialogue principle. In the encounter, the partner must be willing to yield to the other, especially when the other is God. Joyous acceptance is the coin of the realm in God's kingdom. In typical Lucan style this pericope is a balanced "whole" presentation, with the scene ending in a joyous yes after the angel's initial invitation to joy. Mary in her obedience enters into this joy. In his inaugural homily, Benedict XVI says, "To know what God wants . . . is also our joy."

Mary's unique call is a call from freedom to freedom. She says yes in complete freedom. God sovereignly chooses whom he will. He encounters in Mary the completely obedient response, freely given in great joy. Like her son, she is a servant of God's will.

The entire Annunciation dialogue serves as a model for the *I-Thou* relationship with God. It reveals the God-human relationship; it places the accent on God but also emphasizes the reciprocal nature and the importance of the human being's involvement. The uniqueness of Mary reminds each individual of his or her own uniqueness granted by God through grace. Each person is the bearer of a divine task or mission that can be known through the dialogic meeting with God. It is the responsibility of all individuals to say yes to the role and mission for which they have been equipped by God. Talents and potentialities placed there freely by God must be utilized and returned freely to him for his use. Through each encounter, whether with God or his messenger (angelic or human), each individual is prompted to embrace each new direction, to play the role assigned, thereby becoming a theological person in God's kingdom. The Annunciation dialogue leads one to see Mary as a role model in the God-human relationship.

At the end of an article, Raymond Brown cited a passage from Pope Paul VI's *Marialis Cultus*.<sup>49</sup> I defer to Brown's judg-

<sup>49</sup> Raymond E. Brown, "The Annunciation to Mary, the Visitation, and the Magnificat (Luke 1:26-56)," *Worship* 62 (May 1988):259. Cf. *Marialis Cultus*, no. 35.

ment when he praises Pope Paul VI's words by saying, "I cannot phrase better what the Bible tells us about Mary in the Infancy Narratives and elsewhere":

The Virgin Mary has always [been] proposed to the faithful by the church as an example to be imitated, not precisely in the type of life she led and much less for the sociocultural background in which she lived and which scarcely today exists anywhere. Rather she is held up as an example to the faithful for the way in which in her own particular life she fully and responsibly accepted the will of God, because she heard the word of God and acted on it, and because charity and the spirit of service were the driving force of her actions. She is worthy of imitation because she was the first and most perfect of Christ's disciples.

## Conclusion

With singular insight, Balthasar considered the Annunciation scene as a dialogic event, carrying with it theological personhood for Mary as she accepts her mission. Up until his development of *Theo-drama*, which contains the dialogic event at its heart, neither theologians nor exegetes considered the Annunciation as a dialogic event.<sup>50</sup> Nor were the Old and New Covenants viewed as dialogic events insuring personhood for those figures of salvation history.

Through such dialogue, relation and all that it bears (friendship, love, freedom, responsibility) grows. God decides to initiate a relation with particular persons.<sup>51</sup> So much of what occurs in the Annunciation serves as a model for the dialogues that follow it; that is to say, mediation is the way that God chooses to reveal his presence and mission. The triune being of love places itself in relation in an *I-Thou* exchange. Mary's finiteness is open to God's call and calls upon that infinity for completion.<sup>52</sup>

It is an encounter between God and humanity that occurs in the realm of the concrete and human senses where "flesh

<sup>50</sup> This means, of course, that the dialogic event is more than just a dialogue, but includes those elements discussed throughout this study.

<sup>51</sup> Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 5:508.

<sup>52</sup> Johann G. Roten, "Hans Urs von Balthasar's Anthropology in Light of His Marian Thinking," *Communio* 20 (Summer 1993): 312.

speaks to flesh.”<sup>53</sup> Mary's relation through the dialogue with God begins her fulfillment as a person and demonstrates the most personal and intimate relation upon which others can be modeled.<sup>54</sup> Mary is the prototype of the I-Thou relation because she imitates the creativity of the Holy Spirit as he listened and received from the Father and the Son. Through his understanding of the dialogic event as mirroring a Trinitarian conversation, Balthasar clearly points out how an individual subject comes into existence as a theological person through the dialogue. He goes farther in pointing to Mary as the fulfillment of personhood and *model* of the I-Thou dialogue. Mary is the image, the figure of the entire people of God in its relation with God.<sup>55</sup>

This study began by examining and demonstrating that the God-human relationship is first discovered through the biblical recounting of covenant. Through an overview of biblical covenant, the study introduced the idea that a dialogue was always a central ingredient, the very structure, of every covenantal God-human relationship. Since the covenant is the primordial example of dialogic encounter by which an individual becomes a theological person, it follows that Mary, the prototype, would have such a covenantal relation with God. Further, it could be hypothesized that her covenantal relationship would contain archetypal features that serve as a model for all subsequent covenantal and dialogic God-human relations.

Mary is a prototype for all persons who, though not full of grace, receive God's similar spiritual blessings and gifts. This eternal gift in which all share is the “seed of holiness,”<sup>56</sup> first planted in Mary but also deposited in each follower of Christ. Just as she, an individual person, could contain and bring to maturity in herself the covenantal vocation of all the people of God, so she can today be hailed as the fulfillment of person-

<sup>53</sup> Roten, “Hans Urs von Balthasar's Anthropology,” 313.

<sup>54</sup> Klemens Stock states that the fundamental relationship with God that Mary enjoys is announced by Gabriel's words.

<sup>55</sup> La Potterie, *Mary in the Mystery*, xii.

<sup>56</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 7. *The New Covenant* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 60.



hood and an exemplary person of election and call. We saw briefly how her new name, *kecharitoméne*, reveals her mission. Saying that this name carries the “whole message” of the Annunciation means that this word captures all the necessary elements of personhood: to be in relation, to do God’s will, to be called or given a vocation, to be prepared in advance for the task. The hallmark of Balthasar’s dialogic event—by which an individual subject becomes a theological person—is saying yes to God’s mission.

Like Mary, we might consider that parts of our lives have been in preparation for a mission or call. *Theo-drama* engages the subject in dramatic dialogue to free one from self and one’s own plans and designs, in order to say yes to what God has in store for each person.<sup>57</sup> Mary is the perfect example of a human being freed from self. Through the dialogue, God himself leads the person to a greater self-awareness and, at the same time, to those choices that lead to a God-chosen task. We receive our specific and individualized dignity when we take on our mission with its unique theological meaning. Mary reaches the fullness of personhood by identifying completely with her mission. She is named by God, and she defines herself by reformulating God’s wishes; her response “I am the handmaid of the Lord” beautifully reflects this reformulation. In this brief dialogic encounter she sees herself, her person, in a new light. In her humble acceptance, mission and person come together. Mary at the Annunciation, giving herself over to the mission, is a model of transparency and availability that we can imitate.

The Annunciation reveals an anthropology based on the creature’s exercise of free will in the reception of grace, situated in an I-Thou relationship. This reflects an intimate, personal relationship in which God and Mary (representing all creatures) are free partners. Because the Virgin Mary fulfills the above-mentioned elements of Balthasar’s theology in an archetypal fashion, her response to God in the dialogic event is considered the exemplary event of the God-human relation. From the exemplary interplay between Trinitarian freedom and

<sup>57</sup> Roten, “Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Anthropology,” 327.

Mary's human freedom, the theological person emerges. As her personal freedom leads to mutuality, so should our freedom.

Balthasar believed that Mary is model and prototype for all persons. He moved even beyond that belief to express that her interaction with God, as fulfilled in the Annunciation event, serves as the exemplary event of the God-human relation. The very essence of the God-human relation is best understood and reflected in Mary's relationship as captured in the Annunciation. We look to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the icon of freedom, whose prompt yes to God's will echoes down the halls of time encouraging every person of creation to participate fully in the glorious liberty of the children of God (Rom. 8:21).